United Nations E/CN.9/2015/NGO/16

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
4 January 2015

Original: English

Commission on Population and Development
Forty-eighth session
13-17 April 2015
General debate on national experience in population matters: realizing the future we want — integrating population issues into sustainable development, including in the post-2015 development agenda

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

14-67548 (E) 300115

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Statement

The future we want, A/RES/66/288, was agreed by Heads of State and government representatives who shared a common vision of renewed commitment to sustainable development and to ensure promotion "of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for present and future generations."

They recognized that "poverty eradication is the greatest global challenge facing the world today" and "that people are at the centre of sustainable development and, in this regard, we strive for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive, and we commit to work together to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development and environmental protection and thereby to benefit all".

Priests for Life acknowledges the urgent need to eradicate poverty and its devastating impact and to implement programmes and policies that will directly benefit all people, today and in the future.

We believe that the well-being, dignity, and worth of all — every human life without exception — is the foundation of policies and programmes that liberate countries and, most importantly, people from poverty. All individuals have the potential to make significant contributions to eradicating poverty; no life is expendable.

The future we want is one in which every human life is valued for his or her innate worth and no member of the human family is stripped of human dignity and denied the most basic right — the right to life — through policies that allow individuals to be marginalized and treated as a problem, rather than as potential contributors to poverty eradication.

Population control and reproductive health programmes that target the elimination of children through abortion discriminate against children in the womb, and conflict with the Convention on the Rights of the Child which reminds us, "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth".

The provision of health care services that respect the right to life of each and every human life are essential to continued progress in reducing both maternal and child mortality. Evidence shows that the provision of life-affirming maternal health care reduces maternal deaths.

Efforts to provide all mothers with skilled birth assistance must continue in the post-2015 development agenda. Skilled childbirth attendants recognize obstetric emergencies and help women receive critical emergency obstetric care and treatment. Complications from childbirth including hemorrhage — the number one cause of maternal death — must continue to be treated and prevented while mothers receive essential clean blood transfusions and antibiotics. Increased access to pre-natal care, including adequate nutrition and vitamins, will save the lives of both mothers and children.

Women need greater access to health care for prevention and treatment of disease and disorders including malaria, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, anemia, malaria,

cardiovascular disease, tuberculosis, epilepsy, and diabetes — all factors that increase the risk of maternal death.

Access to abortion, whether in the context of "reproductive ealth" or "reproductive rights", or as a component of population control, is opposed and restricted by many countries. Access to abortion does not have universal support, is not a universally recognized human right, and does not belong in the post-2015 development agenda.

The 2014 report "Abortion laws and other reproductive rights policies and data around the world" by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat reveals that policies on abortion "remain restrictive in many countries", and "only about one third of countries (36 per cent) permitted abortion for economic or social reasons or on request", while "only in half of the countries when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest or in cases of foetal impairment."

The impact of 'the missing children' is a challenge for a record number of countries whose low fertility rates have resulted in too few young workers who can contribute to social security and pension programmes and take the place of elderly workers who have been forced to work years beyond retirement. Governments are facing unprecedented social development challenges due to the decline in births, while the existing population ages in unprecedented numbers.

Abortion laws and other reproductive rights policies and data around the world document the dramatic decline in fertility, "... the number of countries with total fertility below the replacement level (2.1 children per woman) has increased from 55 countries in 1990-1995 to 86 countries in 2010-2015."

The report reveals the record-setting number of actions to increase birth rates among developed countries: "the percentage of Governments with policies to raise fertility has almost doubled (from 14 per cent in 1996 to 27 per cent in 2013)" while more than two thirds of Governments in developed regions "had policies to raise fertility".

It explains that the decline is not limited to developed countries: "Between 1996 and 2013, the percentage of Governments with policies to raise fertility has also increased in developing regions, from 8 per cent in 1996 to 14 per cent in 2013), while the percentage with policies to lower fertility has remained mostly unchanged (56 per cent in 1996 and 57 per cent 2013)" and states, "... the percentage of Governments with policies to raise fertility was highest in Europe (73 per cent)."

As some countries struggle to increase fertility, others are working to reduce newborn mortality. Both are critical areas for progress in the post-2015 development agenda.

The United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN IGME), in the 2013 report — "Levels & Trends in Child Mortality" — reported on the need for increased efforts to save the lives of newborns stating, "The proportion of under-five deaths that occur within the first month of life (the neonatal period) has increased 19 percent since 1990, from 37 percent to 44 percent, because declines in the neonatal mortality rate are slower than those in the mortality rate for older children."

The report also reveals that while the deaths of children under age five declined, nearly 18,000 children under five years of age died every day in 2012. The causes of their deaths included preventable and treatable conditions attributed to pneumonia, preterm birth complications, complications during birth, diarrhea and malaria. Undernutrition was a factor in 45 percent of under-five deaths.

The provision of nutrition demands special attention in the post-2015 agenda. Malnutrition is the underlying cause of death for at least 3.1 million children a year. More than 800,000 babies — one in four newborns — die each year because they are born too soon or too small as a result of poor maternal nutrition.

It is increasingly recognized that adequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life — from conception to the second birthday — saves the lives of women and children and reduces stunted growth and malnutrition.

When women of child-bearing age are well-nourished, they are healthier and better able to provide nourishment for their child in the womb, able to successfully and exclusively breastfeed, and to make nutritious food choices for their child under age two; all essential to ensuring healthy physical and cognitive development. When children thrive, they are empowered to become healthy adults who are better equipped to make meaningful contributions to their families, society, and country.

The elimination of malnutrition during the first 1,000 days of life for a child, and the provision of nutrition for all women of child-bearing age, will not only save the lives of women and children and contribute to their well-being, but will improve the economies of countries.

Priests for Life believes that women, and countries, deserve programmes and policies in the post-2015 development agenda that ensure healthy reproduction and believes that every newly created life has innate worth and dignity.

The intrinsic dignity of life is the foundation of human rights. Life is not just for the privileged, the perfect and the planned, but extends to all members of the human family, including preborn children. Policies to eradicate poverty must recognize the potential of all individuals to help to solve the problem of poverty and not treat any group of people as a problem.

Priests for Life believes that "The Future We Want" is one which respects the dignity and worth of all lives, from conception to natural death.